

*Near Andersonville* (1865–66; p. TK), raising questions about Homer’s “understated empathy” for the powerless, that is, White and Black women, children, rural laborers, and sailors.<sup>18</sup>

This critical exploration of gender, race, and class in Homer’s production—perhaps unsurprising given the more inclusive approach of art history since the 1980s—can also be found in more recent exhibitions centered on single masterworks in context, for example, Kathleen A. Foster’s *Shipwreck! Winslow Homer and “The Life Line,”* which was seen at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2012. It has also informed efforts marking new additions to permanent collections, namely, the 2013 gift to the Bowdoin College Museum of Art of a Homer-owned, English-made camera that inspired Dana E. Byrd and Frank H. Good-year III’s 2018 project *Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*. Both of these important undertakings went beyond a focus on subject matter alone to investigate Homer’s practice and process, incorporating conservation studies into their interpretive scope. Similarly, Martha Tedeschi’s 2008 exhibition of Homer’s watercolors at the Art Institute of Chicago—subtitled *The Color of Light*—built on Cooper’s research to dazzle us with fresh analyses of pigment, paper, and purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Two other outstanding thematic exhibitions yielded a clearer understanding of Homer’s critical reputation and legacy at the end and beginning of his career. The first, Bruce Robertson’s 1990 show, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer: His Late Paintings and Their Influence*, for the Cleveland Museum of Art, positioned Homer at the top of a lineage of American painters stretching from Robert Henri to Marsden Hartley to Rockwell Kent.<sup>20</sup> The second, Margaret C. Conrads’s *Winslow Homer and the Critics: Forging a National Art in the 1870s* (drawn from her PhD dissertation), which originated at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 2001, investigated the artist’s most enterprising decade.

*Bold, Cautious, True: Walt Whitman and American Art of the Civil War Era*, Kevin Sharp’s 2009 exhibition and book, organized by the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis, advanced interpretations of Homer’s war imagery (among the work of other contemporaries) by situating it in broader cultural themes of slavery and service, loss and memory.<sup>21</sup> Lesser-studied pictures like the haunting *Trooper Meditating beside a Grave* (fig. 4), interpreted alongside Walt Whitman’s poem “As Toilsome I Wander’d Virginia’s Woods,” offered an especially apt pairing as both works examine the country’s collective trauma as a metaphor for the death of national innocence. Ultimately, the effort urged a deeper consideration of Homer’s Civil War paintings in terms of the psychological, as well as physical, costs of the conflict, evoking a famous letter from Homer’s mother, in which she observed how deeply scarred he was by his experiences in the South—returning, as she said, a changed man.<sup>22</sup>

How will future Homer studies build on and go beyond this existing scholarship? Thanks to the



Fig. 3. Napoleon Sarony (American, 1821–1896). *Winslow Homer*, 1880. Albumen print, 5 7/8 × 4 1/4 in. (14.9 × 10.8 cm). Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Gift of the Homer Family (1964.69.179.4)



Fig. 4. *Trooper Meditating beside a Grave*, ca. 1865. Oil on canvas, 16 × 8 in. (40.6 × 20.3 cm). Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Gift of Dr. Harold Gifford and Ann Gifford Forbes (1960.298)



Fig. 5. Kerry James Marshall (American, born 1955). *Gulf Stream*, 2003. Acrylic and glitter on canvas, 108 × 156 in. (274.3 × 396.2 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2004 (2004.15)



Fig. 6. Kara Walker (American, born 1969). Detail of *Fons Americanus*, 2019. Mixed media. Tate Modern, London

impressive, decades-in-the-making, five-volume catalogue raisonné initially compiled by Goodrich—and heroically completed by Abigail Gerdts in 2014—the artist’s career-spanning production can now be analyzed in full.<sup>23</sup> That publication, coupled with a seemingly unending series of new questions and theoretical approaches to Homer’s output, continues to generate innovative readings and understandings.<sup>24</sup> We view *Crosscurrents* as part of that broader effort, locating additional meanings in potent themes of conflict.

More Homer scholarship needs to critically interrogate how race and class and their structures of power weave throughout his production, grounded in the afterlives of transatlantic slavery, plantation economies, and cultural dispossession, scarred and defined by violence and survivance.<sup>25</sup> There has long been resistance to acknowledging the centrality and complexity of Black imagery in Homer’s oeuvre, including in the past at The Met. This has manifest in a tendency to read these works as less consequential than his better-known depictions of White Americans and unpeopled seascapes. And when such works are foregrounded, they are often seen uniformly through a lens of racial caricature—an evident misreading of the artist’s evolving visual language and motives.<sup>26</sup> In her essay for this catalogue, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw addresses these freighted issues of representation and interpretation.

Current scholars of the Black Atlantic, with diverse perspectives, bring innovative questions to Homer’s art.<sup>27</sup> What we as organizers of *Crosscurrents* always felt would be a relevant approach—the diachronic focus on conflict and struggle in the artist’s production—became more urgent after the racial reckoning fueled by the murder of George Floyd and a reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter social-justice movement during the pandemic summer of 2020. Moreover, the timely and dialogic resonance of Homer’s art, particularly his complicated renderings of Black figures, is evident in the ongoing engagement with this imagery by a range of literary and visual artists of color, from Derek Walcott to Kerry James Marshall (fig. 5) to Kara Walker (fig. 6).

Based on these past, present, and potentially forthcoming investigations, viewers undoubtedly will continue to be compelled by Homer’s work—delving further, seeing clearer, and perceiving more acutely the formal artistry and interpretive sophistication of this enduring American artist—as complex as the country that challenged and inspired him.

# Frontier, Ocean, Empire: Vistas of Expansion in Winslow Homer’s United States

Daniel Immerwahr

In 1836, the year Winslow Homer was born, former president John Quincy Adams rose in the House of Representatives to address the United States’ future. The army was fighting a brutal campaign against the Seminoles in Florida, and politicians were spoiling for an expansionist war to the west. Adams saw his country coiled on the starter block, ready to burst into an imperial sprint, and he sought to stop it. “Are you not large and unwieldy enough already?” he asked. “Have you not Indians enough to expel from the land of their fathers’ sepulchres, and to exterminate?”<sup>1</sup>

Apparently not. Over the course of Homer’s life, the United States shot forward like a rocket. At his birth in 1836, it had twenty-four states and a western border that stopped at Texas (or, as it was then called, Mexico). By his death in 1910, the country was hardly recognizable. It had forty-six states plus colonies in the Caribbean, the Arctic, the Pacific, and Asia. Its population had more than quintupled and its economy—now the world’s largest—had grown an astonishing sixteen-fold.<sup>2</sup> Railroads spanned the continent, telegraphic cables reached across the oceans, and airplanes were starting to fill the air.

Where was Homer in this age of explosive expansion? Nowhere, it might seem. The painter was born in Boston and his ashes were buried five miles to the west in Mount Auburn Cemetery. He spent most of his life in New York and New England. While his compatriots were chasing Native Americans across the plains of South Dakota or outfitting their booming cities with the world’s first skyscrapers, Homer was painting bucolic watercolors of dogs, deer, and trout in the Adirondacks. Placed beside his US contemporaries Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Edwin Church, known for their lavish paintings of the Far West and foreign countries, Homer appears parochial.

He appears so, but he wasn’t. The image of Homer as a homebound, inward-looking painter better reflects his reception than his artistic production. Yes, he depicted small fishing villages, but he stressed their connections to vast oceanic space. His widely admired Maine seascapes conversed with his maritime paintings of England, Quebec, the Bahamas, and Bermuda. It’s easy to see Homer’s bright Caribbean scenes as light-hearted vacation paintings, distractions from his more substantive and darker-hued life’s work. Yet by taking all of Homer’s ports of call seriously, we can understand him to be concerned with questions of imperial space. At a time when the shape of US power was uncertain, Homer’s art probed the geographic possibilities.

To see how, it’s important to understand the spatial context in which Homer worked. His career began in the Civil War, a struggle of violent national integration. Though typically seen as a contest between North and South, it can also be understood, in the historian Megan Kate Nelson’s words, as a “three-cornered war,” with the US Army simultaneously fighting secessionist forces in the South and Indigenous ones in the West.<sup>3</sup> It beat both, and by the late nineteenth century a stubbornly fragmented

country had become a forcibly integrated one, with railroads, telegraph lines, capital flows, and a strengthened central state binding the peripheral regions to Homer’s home, the Northeastern core.<sup>4</sup> Two years serve as landmarks: 1877, when President Rutherford B. Hayes concluded the federal military occupation of the South, and 1890, when the US Army finally subdued the formidable Lakota with Wounded Knee and when, according to the US Census superintendent, the Western frontier ceased to exist as a distinct space.

For the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, writing in 1893, the end of the frontier marked a crisis. The outward pushing of borders had been hitherto the “distinguishing feature of American life,” the foundation of its character, economy, and politics.<sup>5</sup> The question was: What next? Turner’s frontier thesis captured the anxieties of his day. Though the country’s economy was enormous, it was also unstable, given to crashes and recessions. Many hoped that a spatial solution—expansion in some new form, to compensate for the Western frontier’s closure—could smooth matters.

Two such solutions appeared particularly inviting. First, the United States could reach back across the Atlantic, enriching its commerce and culture by connecting more closely to Europe. The painter John Singer Sargent, a US citizen who nevertheless spent most of his life in Europe, represented this Atlantic orientation.<sup>6</sup> Second, the United States might make more frontier by descending on the tropics and seizing colonies. Theodore Roosevelt, who personally invaded Cuba and orchestrated a war in the Philippines, represented this colonizing orientation.<sup>7</sup> The two visions weren’t mutually exclusive, but they implied different directions. The Atlanticists looked east, the imperialists looked south.

And where did Homer look? For a curious and prolific nineteenth-century US painter, it’s striking how uninterested he was in the West. Neither the physical place, which he never visited, nor its visual tropes—log cabins, tipis, Plains Indians, railways, bison herds—caught his eye. The land frontier did not concern him.

But the oceanic frontier did. Or oceanic *frontiers*—plural. At a time when his compatriots were debating how the United States might stretch its influence across water, Homer was painting maritime vistas to the east and south. Sometimes, these were enticing. Often, they were forbidding. By placing Homer within the geographical imaginaries of his day, we can understand his work as reflecting on his country’s spatial trajectory. Even when depicting small fishing towns, Homer was looking outward.

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The first direction Homer gazed was east, across the Atlantic to Europe. He wasn’t the only one to do so. The end of the Civil War inaugurated a period of Atlantic-facing globalization for the United States. In the late nineteenth century, it received more investment and immigration than any other country in the world, and the bulk of those flows originated in





*Snap the Whip*, 1872  
 Oil on canvas  
 12 × 20 in. (30.5 × 50.8 cm)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 New York, Gift of Christian A. Zabriskie,  
 1950 (50.41)



*Old Mill (The Morning Bell)*, 1871  
 Oil on canvas  
 24 × 38½ in. (61 × 96.8 cm)  
 Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven,  
 Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A.  
 1903 (1961.18.26)









*A Garden in Nassau*, 1885  
 Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on  
 wove paper  
 14½ × 21 in. (36.8 × 53.3 cm)  
 Terra Foundation for American Art,  
 Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection  
 (1994.10)

